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ABSTRACT

Letting the life stories of students or parts of those stories into composition courses not only helps students improve their writing skills, but also helps many of them connect with themselves--who they are, who they are becoming, what they want to become--in ways that enhance their abilities to learn in their own fields. Students who fail to ask such questions mistake skills for understanding and thus fail to benefit from the goals of a liberal education. Consequently, autobiographical writing should be an important element in any Writing-across-the-Curriculum program. (Autobiographical writing by a teacher and by three students are included, and a 7-item bibliography is attached.) (SAM)

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY AND WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:

Bringing "Life" to Disciplinary Writing

by

Elaine M. Pilon

Paper delivered at the Conference on College Composition and Communication, San Diego, CA, April 1-3, 1993

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AUTOBIOGRAPHY and WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM:
Bringing "Life" to Disciplinary Writing

The overall title of this panel is "The Nature of Writing in WAC Programs." I wondered what that meant. The "nature" of writing in WAC programs? It could mean, I guess, what something looks like. In this case, I guess it asks and answers questions about the characteristics of writing in various disciplinary areas and/or describes kinds of writing that are done in content areas across the college curriculum.

I'd like to talk about the future, about a wish for the "nature" of writing in WAC programs, in particular about the inclusion of lives--autobiography--in the writing that is done in courses across the university. Most specifically, I'd like to address autobiography as an important component in our discipline-and not-so-discipline specific composition courses.

I believe that letting the life stories of students or parts of those stories into our composition courses not only helps students improve their writing skills but it also helps many of them connect with themselves--who they are, who they are becoming, what they want to become--in ways that enhance their ability to learn in their own fields. Most importantly, I think that autobiographical writing shows students how to begin, or to continue to ask some fundamental questions central to education: "where am I in this? how can I make my mark? whose interests are represented?" (Bartholomae and Petrosky 12). "To fail to ask these questions," Bartholomae and Petrosky remind us in the introduction to their text, Ways of Reading, "is to mistake skill

for understanding, and it is to misunderstand the goals of a liberal education" (13).

I don't have any data to present, nor any hard-and-fast conclusions about why I believe that autobiographical writing needs to be an important component of any Writing Across the Curriculum program. What I have are stories: my story as a student, as a student trying to find a place in the world of work, as a woman trying to name and claim her life. I have teacher stories, too, stories from students who are also trying to find their places in a work world, to situate their lives. I suppose, in the end, I probably really only have my own story, my autobiography, because as I tell the students' stories, they become a part of my own.

So here are some pieces of my story and some pieces of my students' stories, told with their agreement. I tell their stories with respect, even with reverence because the stories students have shared with me in the past eight years of teaching have given me understandings about my own life, about learning, about teaching and most importantly about loving. I, like Gary Tate, in a recent article in College English "refuse to look at my students as primarily history majors, accounting majors, nursing majors. I much prefer to think of them and treat them as people whose most important conversations will take place outside the academy, as they struggle to figure out how to live their lives--that is, how to vote and love and survive, how to respond to change and diversity and death and oppression and freedom"

(320).

My own entrance into the field of Composition Studies has been a rocky one: difficult and exhausting, frustrating and confusing but also exciting and energizing, filled with moments of illuminating understandings of the composition field and of teaching, knowledge about myself and of those people who are intertwined with my life in various ways and at differing degrees of distance and closeness. Those moments of illumination--the understandings about concepts in the field, about pedagogy, about my place in composition studies as researcher and scholar and teacher and student happened primarily for me through writing. But not through writing academic papers for the courses I took in Composition Theory and Practice, WAC, Gender and Language, The History of Rhetoric but by writing personal, autobiographical essays through which I wove my growing understandings of composition theory, practice, and pedagogy. In the vein of Jane Thompkins article, "Me and My Shadow," which I read some years after I had forced and forged a place for my autobiographical pieces in my own academic world, I continue to write about my life and my work as one piece, a patchwork quilt.

When I first began my graduate studies, now nearly 5 years ago, I enrolled in a course on Gender and Language, concerned with reading, writing and pedagogy, taught by a Composition faculty member at the University of Minnesota. In that course, I was not only allowed but encouraged to write about the ways my private life crossed with what I was learning about gendered

language, and language and teaching practices. These assignments were not journal entries I was writing as a separate part of the course, but were the course papers themselves. And the papers were not simply given a grade. An on-going written dialogue was carried on between the instructor and me with each paper that was turned in.

Not only did this way of writing and being responded to deepen my understanding and appreciation of the complexity of writing and composition teaching practice, but it also allowed me to experience writing's enormous power for change in new ways--ways that were now connected with my intellectual and scholarly growth. In explaining what he believes are the differences between the banking concept of education and problem-posing education, Paulo Freire tells us that real education involves "authentic thinking." "Authentic thinking, thinking that is concerned about reality, does not take place in ivory tower isolation (63-64). That communication, connected with my life, was a part of the Gender and Language course I participated in and I began to understand authentic thinking and the meaning of a real education.

A year later, I participated in a seminar on Writing Across the Curriculum. When I began the course, I thought I knew generally what WAC was about, that it was writing-to-learn, in part, at least. Whether the subject matter was molecular biology, mechanical engineering or composition studies, one of the goals of WAC programs was to encourage writing to discover what one

knew and to learn about what one didn't already know. I assumed that I would "write to learn" in this course, practicing what we were studying. And we did. We were required to journal, to keep a writer's notebook throughout the quarter. The required paper for the course was a 15-20 page research paper on any topic of WAC we were interested in.

I discovered quite early in the quarter that I was having difficulty participating in the seminar discussions despite the fact that the number of students was only eight or ten and the instructor encouraged inclusiveness and talk. It was not a lecture course. As the quarter wore on I also discovered that not only couldn't I find my voice in the class but I couldn't write a research paper. I was bored with the composition studies we were reading, disconnected from the discussions and now frozen in every effort to write. Here is an excerpt of a journal entry I wrote while taking this course:

> I've put off (writing this paper) many days and weeks in a row and I told myself that I wouldn't do that again.... I think I'm really bored with this stuff. I don't think it has enough creativity in it for me. Actually, I think that it is not connected enough to the reality of my life....How do you struggle to adjust your writing to some objective reality out there? Write an essay on this or that when <u>your</u> this or that is out in the driveway fighting with his brother and there are dirty dishes, not just in the sink and on the

table, but in the bedroom of a teenager you are trying to raise?

How do you get to the core of your learning if your real life is trying to hang onto that relationship that is ever-shifting, pulling apart, coming together with that teenager, and the classroom situations make you feel stupid and worthless? Not stupid and worthless because anybody said that to you. Or because there is anything overtly disrespectful of you as a person. It is a much more insidious kind of belittling than that, the kind our society supports in its support of one-up, one-down relationships. It's the kind that makes you wonder if you lost your mind because you don't feel like you can play the game, that you don't want to play and the anger that comes with knowing that if you don't play the game that you won't eat and your children won't eat....

I go on in what became a very lengthy journal entry to describe for myself what I was feeling about the educational system that we have in place and what I think should be central to a liberal education and the place of writing in that education. I was writing about, without knowing it, what it felt like to be a 35-year-old woman with three children, trying to make a life for herself in a field she had always loved and finding out that it was the same old one-up, one-down system, trying to find a way in, trying to understand the language,

trying to speak, to write, to be heard.

I did, of course, write a paper for that WAC seminar. I took the risk of writing the research paper, complete with carefully documented written sources woven through with the autobiographical details of what that WAC seminar had been like for me. The title of the paper I wrote is "Women and WAC: A Reflection on Women's Development and Writing a Personal Narrative" or "How I Saved Myself from Drowning in English 8810." I used the words of Carol Gilligan and Adrienne Rich to open the paper:

> As we have listened for centuries to the voices of men and the theories of development that their experience informs, so we have come more recently to notice not only the silence of women but the difficulty in hearing what they say when they speak.
> --Carol Gilligan, In a Different Voice
>
> And in breaking those silences, naming ourselves, uncovering the hidden, making ourselves present, we begin to define a reality which resonates to us, which affirms our being, which allows the woman teacher and the woman student alike to take ourselves, and each other seriously: meaning, to begin taking charge of our lives.
> --Adrienne Rich, "Taking Women Students Seriously"

What I then went on to say in the paper involved stating that I believed if Writing Across the Curriculum programs were ever going to be anything useful or worthwhile, anything "other than the same wolf in a new style of sheep's clothing" then all of us in the composition field needed to make a greater effort at understanding how women learn and how connected to a growing self that learning is and the ways that writing works within that learning and growing process. I have been fortunate to continue

throughout my graduate education to productively dialogue with the composition faculty member who taught this WAC seminar. I risked being heard and was.

Three years later, this past Fall, I wrote my preliminary doctoral exam in which I continued to wrestle with issues around women and writing, women and creativity, women and learning. For the exam paper itself, I identified what I felt were three of the important aspects of women's creative and learning processes: the need for solitude in which to learn the self, become author or authority; secondly, relationships with others--students and instructors; and lastly, written models of lives, the truthful lives of women. Of course I grounded the paper in strong theoretical footings, reciting the litany of those who have gone before us doing the important work of excavating and laying foundations: Virginia Woolf, Carol Gilligan who gave us new understandings of women's relational moral development in her study <u>In a Different Voice</u>, Mary Belenky, Blythe Clinchy, Nancy Goldberger and Jill Tarule who collaborated on <u>Women's Ways of Knowing</u>, Carol Heilbrun who wrote <u>Writing A Woman's Life</u>, Adrienne Rich, May Sarton, Elizabeth Flynn, Janet Emig, Ann Berthoff and so many others. And of course, as I said, I added my piece to the quilt, my understandings that had come through hard, hard work, through my writing, through my relationships, through my reading, through the insistence that my life stay with my work, and my work with my life.

I've been thinking recently about the ways <u>all</u> writers need

this connection with the self and life to really learn, to be active learners, to learn to write, to learn subject matter. It's not that I have arrived at discrediting the idea that women, some at least, may have unique learning needs, in particular returning women students. But what I am hearing and reading from students, male and female, traditional age and returning students, are exciting and sometimes startling examples of real learning both in writing and learning abilities and change and growth in their lives. In other words, real education.

I have been teaching autobiography as a formal paper assignment in every composition course I have taught over the past 4 years at the University of Minnesota. I also allow the inclusion of lives, to whatever degree students want and is appropriate to the genre and their audience, in more formal academic papers. I'm taking more and more risks with this kind of writing in my own scholarly work and in my teaching.

This past quarter I taught two courses in Technical Writing for Engineers. The first assignment was to write a literacy autobiography--an assignment I've adapted from Deborah Brandt's work--of their engineering lives. I asked them to reflect on how they got to be "almost-an-engineer," to name the reading and writing and speaking interests, abilities, family or personal circumstances, character traits, ambitions, motivations, that they felt had influenced them in choosing the field of engineering as a career.

Of course there were some objections that this was not true

technical writing but I told them that the assignment had many purposes, none-the-least of which was a bit like finding the "you are here" spot on a shopping mall map and then moving in the direction that you want and need to go. I wanted them to experience the "surprise" in writing, as Donald Murray names it; I wanted them to have a chance to experience some of the aspects of writing to learn; I wanted them to see what happens in the revision process before we buckled down to learning the surface features of instruction manuals and proposals and memos. I wanted them to read one another's autobiographies so that they would begin to see the people they were working with as they collaborated on proposals.

The responses to the assignment continued throughout the quarter even though we spent no more than 2 weeks on the autobiography. Students would stay after class and talk with me about their writing, write notes to me, talk to me during office hours. Even while we worked on other assignments, the subject would come up again and again. These students seemed as hungry for an ear, a reader, as I had been when I was taking course work in composition studies.

I'd like to read you part of a written response I received towards the end of the quarter from a 22-year-old male student, a graduating senior. His name is Joe and he titled this "Reflections on Writing an Autobiography Paper."

I must admit that when I was originally asked to write the autobiography paper, I thought it was a waste

of time. If you remember, I raised this point in class. I could not see how it would help me in my career to write an autobiography. I was even more dismayed when I received a "C-" for my first time through. When I got such a low grade, I decided to take the assignment seriously, and put some real effort into it.

When I first started to write the paper, I went with the first events that came to mind. In my case, the events really weren't events; they were people. I went with it. I tried to recollect how they influenced my decision to become an engineer. The more I thought about them, the more I began to realize that they <u>really</u> did have a profound impact on my life--more so than I had originally thought. After my first draft was written, I thought to add specific events in my life that made me want to be an engineer, but I thought there was enough content with only discussing the people that influenced my decision.

The first single person that came to mind (from the first moment you told us about the assignment) was Scotty, from Star Trek. I think I am right in assuming you did not like the idea of including a fictional character from Star Trek. Maybe you thought it was my way of saying, "This assignment is lame, and to show I don't take it seriously, I am going to include Scotty."

If you remember, you suggested taking the character completely out of the paper. I think the reason I resisted doing that (and even expanded his section in later drafts) was because he really did influence my decision. When I was a kid, he made me want to be an engineer, and I never completely forgot that. Maybe things would be different if I had grown up watching Perry Mason.

The decision to include my brother, Mike, and my high school science teacher, Mr. Peterson, was actually trivial. They were the only people that have had a significant influence on my becoming an engineer. Also, the impact they had was very clear because their memories are still quite recent.

As I mentioned before, after I got my paper back with the miserable grade, I decided to put a lot of time into the paper. I wanted to get an "A." I started identifying the areas where I could add more details/information to the paper. I also talked to you which gave me a better idea of what you expected. As I worked through a number of drafts, I began to realize that there were a number of details that had eluded me at first. Basically, my memory was improving.

The one event that I felt helped me the most was when I asked my girlfriend (Laura) to help me proofread one of the later drafts (she is an English major). As

we went through this, she would make comments and suggestions. For the most part, she simply made mechanical corrections. However, when she was done, I asked her if it really helped her understand how I got to be where I am. She said "sort-of." I asked her to help me go through step-by-step and identify the areas that made her think that an area was unclear.

When we identified an area that was not clear, I started to explain verbally what the significance was. She said, "Well, if that's what it meant to you, why didn't you put **that** down on paper, rather than what you have here!" This is what helped the most. I would explain to her verbally why the people had an impact on my life (to the point where she felt that she fully understood the significance) and I would write it down.

By doing this, the significance of the people became clearer and better understood. I should have started to do this when I had written the first rough draft. Although having the paper in a later draft form made the task of talking things through with Laura easier. I must admit, that she was a great help, but I don't know if everyone would have been as helpful as her. We did not know why I decide to be an engineer, and **really** wanted to know. (We hadn't been dating for too long when we had to do the assignment.) I am also the only engineer that she knows, so I had to put

things in terms that she could understand and relate to....

Anyway, in closing, I hope this helps with your work. If nothing else, I hope it helps you see how my paper reached its final form. If there is anything else you want to know or if something here is not clear (I am writing this at 3:00 A.M.), just give me a call. By the way, I now think that the autobiography assignment wasn't such a bad idea (actually, I think it is a good idea) because it made me retrace my footsteps to figure out why I am where I am. Knowing this can help focus future work (i.e. grad school, career, etc....). I did not fully appreciate the influences that got me here.

In another course I've taught, advanced expository writing, a major assignment of the quarter was to write a paper on an issue of personal interest to the student, using readings from the text Reading and Writing Across the Curriculum as a jumping off place and then to include other sources, written or interviews, and/or personal experience as they chose and saw fit for their topic and purpose and audience.

I'd like to share a part of one of those student's writing that quarter. I no longer remember this student's major; the course attracts students from a variety of disciplines. This particular student--Aaron--was in the Marine Corps ROTC program. He chose to read the series of essays in our text on obedience to

authority and to write his paper on the necessity for absolute obedience to authority in the military, particularly in the Marine Corps. Aaron was a good student, a fairly good writer, I thought, but he was resistant to revising any of his writing. I continued to encourage him, as did his writing group members to take some risks in his writing, to look at the other sides of the obedience to authority issue. But he continued to churn out basically the same paper, draft after draft. I'd like to read you a sample from the second or third version of his paper. He has titled it "(No Title Yet)."

> A primary goal of Marine Corps indoctrination training is teaching the new Marine instant obedience to orders. In hostile situations precious seconds are likely to be critical in determining the outcome. A Marine that stops and thinks about every order could result in disastrous, and likely fatal, outcomes. This obedience to orders is taught by imposing rigid discipline. The Marine recruit is stripped of his individuality and instructed how to function as a member of a team, the Marine Corps team. Though viewed as cruel by some, the stiff discipline employed in this training contributes to the recruit's motivation to succeed and confidence in the team's ability to accomplish any task. It is this confidence, in both self and team, that will provide the strength and ability to perform well in hostile situations.

> The issue remains: who is responsible for making the decisions, and issuing the orders? This duty falls upon the Marine Corps Officer....

It hadn't changed much from its original form and I still thought the paper had a lifeless, one-sided, moralistic read to it. Soon after he gave me this paper, Aaron disappeared from the course with no word for two weeks. As we were nearing the end of the quarter, Aaron came to my office and carefully laid a paper on my desk, telling me it was his "revised" version and would I read and grade it even though it was late? He offered no explanation when I asked him about his absence, only asking that I read the paper. The paper now has the title "Semper Fi, Buddy," meaning "Always Faithful," the Marine Corps motto; it begins as follows:

> It was a typical night in the Philippines. The dense trees covered the jungle with a curtain of darkness. If there were any stars out that night, the dense canopy was hiding them. The thick jungle air caused Ben's uniform to cling to his body as he put the finishing touches on a letter to a buddy back in the States.
>
> ...just got orders to move the platoon back to the base. This is not the night for a convoy, you can't even see your hand in front of your face. Orders came down that we're to go full security, no lights! Going to be an interesting one. Hope our new platoon

commander is up to it.

Gotta go. Three months and we're out of this oven.

Semper Fi, Buddy!

Ben

Aaron's paper continues...

The letter from Brian presents a moral dilemma for his platoon commander. Ben's platoon has been ordered to return in convoy to the base. In the jungle, darkness engulfs everything making travel difficult. Operating under full security (preventing the use of lights) would make such a journey extremely hazardous, not mention foolish. Ben's platoon commander must decide if the situation warrants his refusal to carry out his orders. He is faced with the question, "Would disobeying orders be the correct course of action?"

In the rest of the essay, Aaron writes about various situations that might require the disobeying of an order, citing particular examples in military history where this disobedience did or should have happened and the various degrees of Marine Corps disobedience. I'd like to read you the concluding section of the paper.

This discussion on obedience dictates what actions Ben's platoon commander should take. Recognizing the inherent risks that the convoy faces, he should order the vehicles to use their lights during the return to

base. (This would be a form of moderate disobedience discussed earlier.) While an officer's primary duty is the accomplishment of the mission, his secondary concern is the welfare and safety of the Marines in his command.

I cannot emphasize enough the importance in recognizing these responsibilities. Failure to evaluate orders can jeopardize the overall mission and put your Marines in peril. The actions taken by Ben's platoon commander serves as an example. Rather than evaluate the situation with his personal judgment, he chose to carry out his orders to the letter. Shrouded in darkness and leading the convoy, his vehicle went over the side of a mountain. The crash killed the platoon commander and his driver. We buried Ben last week.

Ben was the driver of the vehicle and Ben had been a close friend of Aaron's in the ROTC program at the University of Minnesota. Aaron later told me that as he was sitting at a computer terminal in the armory trying to find a way to revise this paper about obedience to authority to my satisfaction, word came about the death of his friend. Two weeks later he went back to the paper and revised the paper the way <u>he</u> wanted to revise it and he was going to read it an assembly of officers' candidates in his program.

Aaron's story changed me and I'm quite certain that it

changed Aaron. The events changed Aaron, pushed him in a direction of growth that none of us choose. Aaron's writing changed too; my teaching and relationships with students changed and they continually change. They learn, I learn, we write, the writing changes, we change and grow, becoming authentic thinkers, gaining an education.

I'd like to close with a short memo from one of last quarter's engineering students, Jeff, a non-traditional age student. He wrote me a memo in response to my request for a course evaluation. This memo gives me lots of "data" to support my belief in continuing with autobiography in my course teaching "across the curriculum" and to encourage its inclusion wherever and whenever I can.

> I really want to dodge this request. Part of me wants to use this form to complain about grades--so I will. Then there's sympathy towards a tough job, personal attraction, caring, wondering about writing, and a list of emotions and confusion that's still unclear. Did you do a good job? Well, yes, I thought so. The biggest improvement you could make in this course, in your teaching, you identified. A quarter is too short.
>
> We attempted an autobiographical piece, instruction manual, resume, and a collaborative proposal in the span of 150 hours--one fourth of a 60-hour week for 10 weeks, fractured and bent together

around other demands. It didn't work for me. Part of my problem is just being too old. I've done a lot of writing in each area except the autobiographical piece. I've formed habits, methods, reasons, markets....It can be hard to change. Some of the learning I was after you didn't like--perhaps I'm not the only person who's got a viewpoint with a reason, method...oh well.

The grade thing. I hate grades. When I am trying to learn, I need to take risks. I did that with the autobiographical piece. I got hurt. Then I tried a whole new approach to graphics for me. I got a C-! Forty hours slaving away at a new approach to graphics and somebody shoots me with an "it's AWFUL." I should have made a slump pump test or something. On one memo I do a business like response (short and to the point)--no credit. So the next time I expound--too long, make it short and to the point. I don't know. Grades don't mean anything in the long run. We both know that. In the short run they're emotional. But, what's really sad is that I have never received a grade that was instructional. Never.

It makes me mad--that's all. Either there are different standards for some of the other work I saw or I really don't understand this material.

Enough. The really neat thing that happened this quarter is that I've started to write. I've gone back

and looked at some of it. Some's good. Some's not so good. Either way the process is fun. You taught me that. You taught me about surprise. I wrote it down the day you said it. Neat, I thought! It's true too. I started this note out that way.

Surprise. What I feel is gratitude. Ignore the other stuff. Thank you.

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